

## Merle Haggard, A Rebel To The End

by Peter Stone Brown

I guess it was sometime in early 1969, in some Morningside Heights apartment, when a friend sang a song about a death row prisoner on his way to be executed whose last request is to hear a song that will take him home. The song was slow, sad and beautiful, the story told in just two verses and a chorus. My friend said the song was by somebody named Merle Haggard. A couple of days later, I saw the song, "Sing Me Back Home" on a new album by the Everly Brothers that looked interesting called *Roots*. That album started with another Merle Haggard song, "Mama Tried." Sometime after that my brother bought *The Best of Merle Haggard*, and I was hooked. The album had a couple of more prison and outlaw songs and that Haggard was an ex-con gave the songs credibility. I was cautiously exploring hardcore country and western, following the trail set by *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* by The Byrds, Bob Dylan and Ian & Sylvia. I was still getting into it when Merle Haggard exploded into the national consciousness with "Okie From Muskogee," which would be his biggest hit. It was a moment of crisis. For all intents and purposes, I was one of those long-haired, pot smoking, anti-Vietnam hippies he was singing about, and when he followed it up with the equally vehement "Fightin' Side of Me," it was like, come on, I'm trying to like you. Ultimately Merle Haggard was too good of a singer, too good a songwriter and too good a musician to let political considerations get in the way.

Merle Haggard was all about tradition. He knew where he came from and he knew where his music came from and he never forgot. He stayed true to the music and true to himself his entire career. Along with Johnny Cash, Haggard was one of the first country artists to record albums as albums, not just a record with a couple of hit singles and whatever songs were hanging around. He paid tribute to his influences with tribute albums. The first and still the best of these was the two-record tribute to Jimmie Rodgers, *Same Train, A Different Time*. He followed that with a tribute to Bob Wills, learning to play fiddle in the process, and even adding surviving members of Wills' Texas Playboys to his band. Before that album, most people of my generation didn't know about Wills or Western Swing. He also paid tribute to his primary vocal inspiration Lefty Frizzell, explored Country Gospel, explored the connection between Country, Western Swing, and New Orleans Blues and late in his career would do a bluegrass album.

His band, The Strangers was quite possibly the best band in country music rivalled only by Buck Owens' Buckaroos and Ernest Tubb's Texas

Troubadours. For the first 22 years, the Strangers were anchored by the astounding Roy Nichols on lead guitar (though on early Haggard albums it was often James Burton). Still Nichols was a major contributor to Haggard's sound. By the mid-'70s, The Strangers included several horn players, a few guitarists, and often had band stands onstage with most of the members sitting down for most of the night standing up for their solos. In concert Haggard would the band take it out allowing most members to solo, and while his playing is often overlooked, Haggard was no slouch as a guitarist himself.

Haggard was usually introduced at his concerts as "the poet of the common man," and it wasn't bullshit, he was. He could usually say what he needed to say in three verses and often less. But one would be hard pressed to find songs that capture the common working man better than "Working Man Blues", "White Line Fever" or "If We Make It Through December." Haggard also tackled the usual country music themes, drinking, truck driving, and romance and heartbreak with songs that became instant classics. Songs such as "Today I Started Loving You Again," "Silver Wings" and "Someday We'll Look Back" are brilliant because of their simple eloquence and perfect examples of superb songwriting. Haggard was at his deepest however when his songs were clearly autobiographical such as "Mama Tried" and "I Take A Lot of Pride In What I Am."

Haggard wrote topical songs his entire career, and while he sang "Okie" and "Fightin' Side" until the end, his positions on some things had changed. He spoke out against the war in Iraq, and wrote "America First" and "Where Did America Go." A lesser known song "Lonesome Today" written by one of his keyboard players, to which he contributed is a swing tune of justified big brother paranoia:

*When the big boys with the microphones are stuffed and packed away  
And they're afraid to say the things they normally often say  
When the symbol of our freedom life, the eagle, flies away  
It's gonna be a lonesome day.*

Finally, Merle Haggard was an exceptional singer. From his earliest songs such as "Sing A Sad Song" to the last songs he recorded, he was a total master of dynamics and phrasing. As with all singers who were fortunate enough to have extended careers, his style changed over the years, not only because of age, but his music became more swing and jazz influenced. But if you go back to his earliest records, once he moved past imitating his heroes, he was incredible from the beginning. And Haggard did not sing his own songs exclusively, his records are filled with songs by other writers such as Tommy Collins, Liz and Casey Anderson, and Dallas Frazier to name

just a few. Haggard knew how to take a song that had been several times by great singers and make it his own, often rivaling the original.

About a year ago, I saw Merle Haggard for what turned out to be the last time and I was pretty sure it would be the last time. His voice was slightly weaker, but he could still sing, and The Strangers with mostly newer members including his son Ben playing excellent guitar sounded, well they sounded like The Strangers. Merle Haggard didn't use a set list. He would come out and sing the songs he felt like singing, and even though it was obvious he wasn't in the best of health, he could still do it. He'd long ago given up caring about record companies, radio and most of the music business bullshit. It was clear what he really cared about was making music. A rebel to the end, he said and did what he wanted to and didn't give a shit what anyone else thought.

Merle Haggard died today on his 79<sup>th</sup> birthday, making this year, still in its infancy one of the worst for the loss of musical heroes. The remaining greats of country music can be counted on one hand. This is a loss beyond measure.

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